

Interventions to Develop an Improvement Culture within Nonprofit Organizations: The Case of Saudi Arabia

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Abstract. It has been confirmed that organizational culture has a remarkable impact on facilitating continuous improvement. Nonetheless, little empirical research has investigated how organizational culture can facilitate continuous improvement. Therefore, this paper asks what interventions facilitate a continuous improvement culture within nonprofit organizations. Qualitative data are suggested as an appropriate method for answering the research question. The present research adopted an interpretive paradigm whereby reality, treated as a subjective and multiple entity that is “socially constructed”, can be mentally explored from the participants' perspectives. Grounded theory was the chosen approach for collecting and analysing the qualitative data; thus, the constructed theories were ‘grounded’ in the data themselves. Thirty one interviews in fifteen nonprofit organizations yielded data which, when analysed revealed a number of interventions, developed by the participants during five focus group discussions.

Keywords. Organizational Culture, Continuous Improvement, Nonprofit Organizations.

1. Introduction

Research reports that organizations can become more competitive by establishing the right culture [1]. Conversely, not focusing on organizational culture affects the longevity of improvements [2]. Continuous improvement has the advantages for smaller organizations of not requiring much outlay or huge expertise [3], thus helping nonprofit organizations in particular. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has not received much academic attention in the literature, despite its unique situation in this regard [4]–[7].

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2. Literature review

In quantitative research, a literature review is commonly systematic [8]. In qualitative research, by contrast, a literature review need not be the same, since its purpose is [8] to interrogate established knowledge, and sort out positions, ideologies and discourses of knowledge to establish a research position. The present research started with its question, which investigates how organizational culture can facilitate continuous improvement, and then looked at the writings that corresponded to them, as follows.

2.1. Organizational culture

The concept of organizational culture has evolved gradually and now seems to be an important asset for determining several aspects which control the continuous development of organizations [9]. The main characteristics of organizational culture have been defined as a pattern of guiding principles or shared basic assumptions in an organization [9]. Sackmann [10] divided its components, using an iceberg model, into visible, i.e. visible, official and 'espoused' and 'basic' manifestations. Beliefs on the second level are tacit, commonly held, habitually present and emotionally anchored [10]. Similarly, Schein [11] argues that culture can be analysed on "three levels: artefacts, espoused beliefs and basic underlying assumptions", agreeing with Sackmann [10] that culture has two sides: visible and invisible. Parker's definition [12] acknowledges both levels: 'Patterns of interpretation composed of the meaning associated with various cultural manifestations, such as stories, rituals, formal and informal practices, jargon and physical arrangements' (note the focus on visible aspects). Invisible aspects were emphasized later; Ravasi and Schultz [13] see it as "a set of shared mental assumptions that guide interpretation and action in organizations by defining appropriate behaviour for various situations".

2.2. Continuous improvement functions

The term 'continuous improvement' came from Toyota [14], which added it to 'lean' tools as an aspect of the Toyota Way. Carlson et al. [15] state that continuous improvement describes processes designed to monitor and improve services to the customer. Bhuiyan and Baghel [16] find that "continuous improvement initiatives in the past reflected the use of various principles related to work improvement, [and] modern day continuous improvement is associated with organized and comprehensive methodologies". Continuous improvement importantly complements more radical, step-change forms of innovation [3]; Bhuiyan and Baghel [16] add that "major improvements take place over time ... [from] numerous incremental improvements". From all these definitions, it can be seen that continuous improvement occurs "where all members of the organisation work together on an ongoing basis improving processes and reducing errors to improve overall performance for the customer" [17]. Generally, continuous improvement can be "an umbrella concept for a wide range of tools and techniques to improve manufacturing performance" [18].

2.3. Nonprofit Organizations

The nonprofit sector is "the sum of private, voluntary, nonprofit organizations and associations" [19]; nonprofit organizations are vital to economic well-being [20]. The

overlap between the main definitions of nonprofit organizations [21] isolates the following features of such bodies, which includes self-governing, nonprofit-distributing, private/non-governmental in basic structure, voluntary to some meaningful extent and engaging people on the basis of some shared interest or concern.

Table 1. The most common forms of nonprofit organizations in Saudi Arabia

Nonprofit Organizations in Saudi Arabia	Supervised by the Ministry of Social Affairs		Others
	Charities	Private Foundations	Royal Foundations
	86.5%	11.8%	1.7%

3. Methodology

Thirty three participants were involved in this research. Purposive sampling was used, of participants who had experienced the phenomenon under study, to report differing experiences of the phenomenon so as to explore multiple dimensions of the social processes in question [22]. At first the participants were randomly selected, as an “appropriate method” [23]; the subsequent findings led to different people, context and places until saturation point. This suggests ‘theoretical sampling’, which “with grounded theory ... is an emergent and ongoing process that evolves as the theory develops from data” [24]. During the last few interviews, no more relevant concepts were merged, which indicates that saturation level had been reached. Several authors confirm that fifteen participants can achieve the level of saturation for qualitative research [25]–[27].

Table 2. Data gathered to synthesise the finding and characteristics of the participants

	Interviews	Focus Groups	Organizations	Participants	Hours
Supportive	Pre	4	3	4	4
	Post	5	3	5	5
Core	Pilot	6		18	18
	Main	16	9		
Focus Groups		5		6	10
Total	31	5	15	33	37
Age	40 years or more 50%	Between 30 and 40 years 31%		30 years or less 19%	
Experience	10 years or more 44%	Between 5 and 10 years 25%		5 years or less 31%	
Managerial Level	Top level 50%	Middle level 25%		Low level 25%	
Education	Higher education or more 56%		Bachelor’s degree or below 44%		

The interviews adopted an issue-focused technique with “a phenomenological orientation, which introduces a specific context that forces respondents to draw on the same stock of knowledge” [10]. The research process indicated that continuous improvement was an appropriate device to allow interviewees to reflect on, freely and openly, the taken-for-granted aspects of their social settings. The interviewees were

asked to give one example (or more) of a continuous improvement story that happened in their organizations. This technique allowed tacit components of culture from the insider's perspective to be brought to the surface. These tacit components would synthesise the situations that were being explored, determined analytically by collecting and analysing relevant information.

4. Findings

A number of interventions have been identified as facilitating continuous improvement in organisations and constantly compared with the literature, as follows.

4.1. A focus on training

A focus on training is supported by Solberg et al [28] as they suggest that the way to delivering quality is by building the skills and experience of the workforce. This is unlikely to happen without training, and Hodges et al [29] reiterate that employees need to work together as a team, but they all need good training. This is also confirmed by Randolph et al [30], who suggest that training for all staff should start by concentrating on small projects first, and then extending the training across all the workforce. It is clear that training is important for improving skills and consequently productivity, as trained workers are more efficient in the way they work as they know what they are expected to do.

4.2. Rewarding good behaviour

It was found that rewarding good behaviour was an effective way of motivating employees and this has been a long-established intervention towards continuous improvement. However, a study by Fryer and Ogden [31] argues that reward and recognition are not so apparent in public sector organisations. It may be that the private sector has more flexibility to reward, although motivation can come from other sources as well. Ibrahimi et al [32] suggest that motivation can be increased by allowing employees to make recommendations, as this gives them ownership; it may also make them feel they are of value to the organisation.

4.3. A team-oriented workforce

There are many factors in continuous improvement and these are often quite complex. The organisational culture can influence the way in which staff feel part of the organisation and a team-oriented workforce can be more productive and work together to share the vision and mission [29]. Part of the development of a team is that the social aspect is not ignored, as this can bring about the team orientation that Firbank [33] states is one of the decisive attributes needed for continuous improvement.

4.4. A focus on processes

A good understanding of the processes relating to continuous improvement is very important [34], and this is reinforced by Solberg et al [28], who have found that

understanding of improvement concepts is limited. Without proper understanding of what is required, then it is clear that senior management will not be able to motivate employees; yet the whole process is complex and multi-dimensional [35]. This means that it is important to dedicate time [36] to ensuring that the whole workforce has a deep understanding of what continuous improvement entails. One factor that has been seen as providing an understanding of the process is accreditation, identified as a driver of quality improvement [36]. This is mainly because everyone has to benchmark against nationally or internationally recognised standards and staff have to become engaged in the process [36]. It gives all employees an understanding of requirements for improving.

4.5. Ongoing technical assistance

Another intervention that may have an impact is the need for ongoing technical assistance, as systems must be constantly checked; this is aggravated by high staff turnover [29], which means that some organisations can lose key staff, who are fundamental to maintaining systems. One of the main barriers to continuous improvement has been identified as staff turnover [36], and this can have a considerable impact on the systems organisations use; specialist staff with the knowledge and skills for maintaining the systems in operation cannot be quickly and easily replaced. The measurements that organisations use for decision-making are primarily data-based [29] and the maintenance of equipment is therefore essential [32]. It has also been suggested that such equipment is flexible and can be rearranged to adapt to circumstances, with an emphasis on ergonomic, as health and safety concepts are primary concerns in the workplace [32]. Improving ergonomics and encouraging employees to make recommendations for a more comfortable and productive workplace can lead to an improvement in productivity [32]; such resources are seen as one of the key facilitators [36].

4.6. Leadership commitment

The importance of commitment to continuous improvement cannot be denied [33], and this is particularly leadership commitment [36]. The enthusiasm and drive of senior managers helps to facilitate quality improvement [31]. However, leaders must be seen to be competent [32], [35] to be perceived as credible facilitators. They must also initiate self-assessment to recognise issues that need to be prioritised in order to promote a culture of continuous improvement [35]; in this way all can see what actions need to be taken to improve.

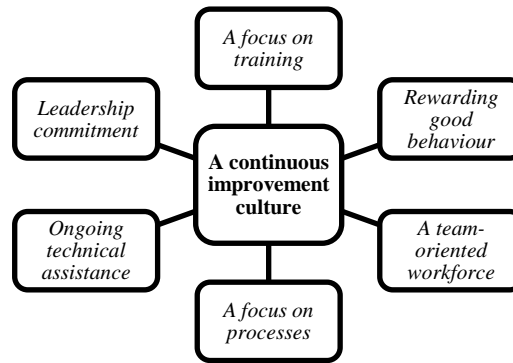


Figure 1. Interventions to to develop a continuous improvement culture

5. Discussion

It is clear that nonprofit organizations are different than other organizations, which has been confirmed by the findings. There is a lack of focus on operations and this highlight the importance of considering that to increase and sustain productivity. Another interesting aspect was found, which is that nonprofit organizations driven by values, their employees and volunteers are motivated by their human/religious beliefs, where the financial benefits have less priority in this sector. However, some of these interventions can be valid to have an impact within other sectors. Further quantitative study could reveal the variation of interventions impact among different sectors.

6. Conclusion

When the constant comparison was conducted during the data analysis, the interventions that have been developed, were found supported by the literature. This confirms the research findings, however, further work needs to be done in order to see how the impact of these interventions has been achieved. This work, when finished, is expected to support nonprofit organizations, which contribute much to the country's economy and well-being.

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